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ABSTRACT

As student diversity grows, it is important to make the basic speech communication course relevant for the students enrolled. Textbooks for the basic speech communication course provide the basic information on the subject; the responsibility for teaching the basic course in speech communication is often assigned to graduate teaching assistants. Does the training for the graduate teaching assistants allow flexibility for the increasingly diverse classroom audiences? With courses that are considered general education, structured and rigid programs are often the result. Graduate teacher autonomy is then limited by the program because of student audience size and minimal training opportunity. Do graduate teaching assistants, who are responsible for instructing students in the basic speech communication classes, have problems with meeting the needs of their students because of their lack of autonomy in the classroom? A study was undertaken at a large midwestern speech communication program to identify graduate teaching assistants' perceptions and expectations about their teaching roles and their student audiences. Oral and written interviews were conducted with 10 graduate assistants to determine their feelings and concerns about these matters. The results indicated that perhaps it is time to investigate possible changes for teaching the basic speech communication course and to focus on targeting the increasingly diverse student audience. (Survey results are included.)
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Are Our Basic Speech Communication Courses Targeting Today's Diverse Student Audience? Teacher Perceptions of Course Rigidity and Its Effect on Student Learning

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Are Our Basic Speech Communication Courses Targeting Today's Diverse Student Audience? Teacher Perceptions of Course Rigidity and Its Effect on Student Learning

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As student diversity grows, it is important to make the basic speech communication course relevant and meaningful for the student audience. Textbooks for the basic speech communication course provide the basic information on the subject; the responsibility for teaching the basic course in speech communication is often assigned to graduate teaching assistants. Does the training for the graduate teaching assistants allow flexibility for the increasingly diverse classroom audiences? Are the materials and the training too rigid to meet the needs of today's students? With courses that are considered general education, and which reach a large number of students, structured and rigid programs are often the result. Graduate teacher autonomy is then limited by the program because of student audience size and minimal training opportunity. Do graduate teaching assistants, who are responsible for instructing students in the basic speech communication classes, have problems with meeting the needs of their students because of their lack of autonomy in the classroom? Are their expectations of their role responsibilities met? A study was undertaken, at a large midwestern speech communication program, to identify graduate teaching assistants' perceptions and expectations about their teaching roles and their student audiences. Oral and written interviews were conducted addressing the feelings and concerns of graduate teaching assistants concerning this subject. The results indicated that perhaps it is time to investigate possible changes for teaching the basic speech communication course and to focus on targeting the increasingly diverse student audience.

Introduction

To respond to the increasing competition for students at colleges and universities, priority should be given to maintaining educational programs which accommodate student diversity and to making the instruction meaningful for the

populations served. Unfortunately, tightly-regimented course programs do not always encourage the freedom which fosters adaptability to unique student characteristics and needs. Identification of differing and of diverse student needs is sometimes overlooked, and basic speech communication courses are often simply modeled on the perceptions of what a "model" course should be like (Boileau, 1985). An excellent overview of the basic speech communication course is presented in an article by Nancy Buerkel-Rothfuss and David Kosloski, 1990.

To assess the extent to which basic speech communication courses can restrict flexibility, and subsequent student learning, it is important to examine: (1) the student audience; (2) the type of basic course selected, with its objectives; (3) and the instruction given in the course. An excellent overview of training is presented in an article by Douglas M. Trank (1989).

The papers presented in this panel address audience analysis and whether it is practiced in the "community" of our classrooms. Research addressing student expectations and perceptions of the speech communication courses, and the type of instruction for the diverse student population, are addressed. This study was undertaken to ascertain graduate teaching assistant' perceptions of course rigidity and of student learning. Graduate teaching assistants provide the nucleus of instruction for many of the basic speech communication course programs. These programs are often rigid and uniform. Rigidity of the instruction can have an effect on the instructors and limit students' educational experiences; interaction between students and teachers effect learning outcomes (Stanford & Roark, 1974).

Surveys have indicated that current speech communication courses are not necessarily meeting diverse needs (Sorenson and Pearson, 1981). Perhaps it is time to consider possible changes in the way our courses are taught and to focus on the increasingly diverse student audience who sits in the basic speech communication classrooms.

The Audience, The Course and The Instructors

There is an increasing competition for the student audience at colleges and universities, so priority should be given to establish the best possible program for attracting students to the basic speech communication course. The basic speech communication course not only provides credibility and popularity for the program, but also attracts speech communication majors. This audience varies greatly at

different colleges and universities, so it is up to each course director to evaluate the uniqueness of the particular audience in that program, and to do it regularly.

This study provides an example of a basic speech communication course program evaluation which is aimed at finding out what graduate teaching assistant perceptions are of their program. Graduate teaching assistants often perform their instruction tasks, as trained, and are not directly asked to evaluate their program or to give feedback. This feedback could provide fresh information and insight. Evaluations should be done with the student audience as well.

The Audience

This study was conducted at a large midwestern university, in the Spring of 1994. The majority of students attend the university following their high school graduation, creating a young university population. The location of the university is in a small city, and most students live within 10 minutes of the campus. There are about 2,000 students each year in the basic speech communication course program. The basic speech communication course is required by most College of Arts & Sciences majors and by College of Business majors. Some College of Education, College of Human Environmental Sciences and College of Agriculture students also are required to take this course. Few College of Engineering and Technology majors take speech communication courses.

The Course

The basic speech communication course is hybrid in make-up and is instructed with an in-house text book. An examination of the hybrid approach to the basic speech communication course is presented by Pearson & West (1991). The hybrid course in this study addresses the process of speech communication, informative communication, problem solving and persuasion. The course objectives are: (1) to introduce the student to the role requirements of the speaker-listener that are common to satisfying our successful communication encounters; (2) to improve the student's proficiency in speaking and listening in interpersonal and public communication encounters; (3) to heighten the student's sense of responsibility as a communicator in a free society. There are 5 oral public speaking assignments. Each semester, there are about 28 sections of the course, mostly taught by graduate teaching assistants, with a limit of 30 students in each section. Four to six sections are taught in

the summer sessions; graduate teaching assistants are responsible for teaching their own two to three sections. There is no mass lecture. The graduate teaching assistants are trained by the course director for a week prior to the fall semester and for 2 days prior to the spring semester. There are other information meetings throughout the semester.

The course is rigid in format, and this rigidity is maintained throughout the semester. Little flexibility is inherent in this program. The same material and assignments are covered in all sections on a given day.

The Instructors

The instructors in this course are all full-time graduate students in speech communication. In the spring semester, nine were in their 20's and one was in his mid-fifties. There were 7 females and 3 males.

Method and Results

The ten graduate teaching assistants in the 1994 Spring Semester were given written surveys and were interviewed concerning this subject.

Written Survey Responses
Teaching Assistant Autonomy and Expectations Survey

This instrument is based on a seven point scale: 7 for Strongly Disagree, 4 as Neutral, and 1 for Strongly Agree.

		Mean	SD	Min	Max
1.	I feel that I have autonomy in teaching my classes.	5.0	1.56	2	7
2.	I feel that the TA training program is too rigid.	2.2	1.40	1	5
3.	I would like more autonomy in my classes.	4.8	1.75	2	7
4.	I am meeting the student diversity in my classroom.	5.9	1.20	4	7
5.	I am meeting the academic expectations of my students.	6.4	0.84	5	7

6. As an instructor, I am meeting my own teaching expectations.	6.1	0.99	5	7
7. Our program operates on a teacher-centered paradigm, not a student-centered paradigm.	3.8	1.81	1	6
8. I feel that my own teaching creativity is stifled in teaching this course.	4.8	2.15	1	7
9. I feel that there needs to be the present uniformity, and rigidity in teaching this multi-sectioned course.	4.5	1.72	1	7
10. I approve of the hybrid approach to communication used in this course.	5.1	1.37	3	7
11. This course meets different student learning styles.	4.8	1.48	3	7
12. This course should be structured with a mass lecture with TA's teaching lab sections.	1.9	1.73	1	6
13. I feel there should be special sections of this course (public speaking anxiety, geared to majors, colleges, etc.).	5.5	2.12	1	7
14. I feel my evaluations would improve if I had more flexibility in teaching.	5.4	1.35	4	7
15. I feel that the grading system is fair.	4.2	2.35	1	7
16. I feel that there should be more TA meetings and training.	4.5	1.72	1	7
17. I feel that teaching has been beneficial for me.	7.0	.00	7	7

18. I feel that we are successful in our teaching objectives.	6.0	1.05	4	7
19. I feel that we are successful in reaching our student audience.	5.5	1.43	2	7
20. I feel this class prepares students with skills that will be beneficial for them.	6.6	0.70	5	7

Interview Responses

When interviewed, responses varied from the written survey. The interviews were audio-taped. Most expressed their complaints and suggestions willingly, and 6 out of 10 said that they felt stifled by the inflexibility of the written survey.

Even though the graduate teaching assistants were busy with their own studies, most would have liked more autonomy in the classroom and felt that they could have added creativity to the assignments and met individual student needs and differences better. Many would have liked to address public speaking anxiety issues more. However, the first-time graduate teaching assistants felt more comfortable with rigid structure.

Most felt that they met the needs of the average students but fell very short when it came to the adult learners and the international students. Some felt the assignments, as given, were not directed at real world communication, that they were directed solely on structured presentations. It was felt that the course was certainly based on the teacher-centered paradigm and not on a student-centered paradigm: directed on making life easier for the instructors and for the program.

The graduate teaching assistants felt that the training program was extremely rigid; they felt very competent to make more of the decisions on how to teach the course. However, it was felt that the training, with its inherent rigidity, did give them a "security blanket" format, particularly when their own studies were heavy.

Most saw the need for some rigidity in a multi-sectioned course in order to deal fairly with grading. The uniformity in testing and assignments made it less likely that there would be student complaints about the "fairness" of individual instructors.

The hybrid format was praised by the teaching assistants as a good first course, but the philosophy of all students being locked into taking this course as a prerequisite to others, did receive criticism. Many felt that a cafeteria offering for a required first speech course would be better, depending on student majors, but that the training for diversified offerings would present problems as far as training was concerned.

Most of the graduate teaching assistants said that because of the rigidity of the course, differing learning styles were difficult to address. Many pointed out that the adult learners and the international students had definite problems with the format and the assignments. It was unanimous when it came to their teaching of their own classes; none preferred the lecture/lab approach to the basic speech communication course.

All felt that addressing student needs through homogeneous grouping of sections would be very beneficial to the program: special sections for students with public speaking anxiety, special sections for different majors, etc. Most felt that this would increase the numbers of students taking the basic course when not required to do so.

None of the graduate teaching assistants liked the grading system, even though the averages turned out to be fair. It was felt that the complications inherent in this system were harmful to their end of the semester student evaluations and to student appreciation of speech communication as a discipline.

All of the graduate teaching assistants felt that the program was personally beneficial for them and that they did accomplish most of their teaching objectives. They felt that more training and meetings, particularly for new instructors would be beneficial and appreciated.

Discussion

Speech communication programs should be evaluated frequently from the student audience perspective, from the instructor perspective, and from the course design perspective. Change is necessary and productive. Focusing on the needs of the increasingly diverse student audience should be an inherent part of addressing this important "community."

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